

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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*Luke 9:51-62*

*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.*

*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'*

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This week is the last week we will be using the lectionary until we resume our 10:30 A.M. services after Labor Day. In the meantime, during our 9:00 A.M. services, we will focus on 10 passages from 10 books of the Bible that I have yet to preach from during my time as your pastor. If you hadn't heard a few weeks ago of how these 10 passages were selected, I placed pieces of paper in a cup, and upon each of them was written the name of a book of the bible I haven't preached on since getting ordained. I then handed the cup to Karen Tudor, our Administrative Assistant, and asked her to select, at random, 10 pieces of paper. And thus were determined the 10 books of the bible I would preach on during our 9:00 A.M. worship services.

But before we begin that journey, we have one more week in the lectionary. The past few weeks, we have been spending time with the prophet Elijah and the King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. However, today we return to the narrative of Jesus by turning to Luke's passage in the ninth chapter of his gospel.

Jesus and his disciples are doing what they are doing most often: traveling around from place to place, preaching the gospel and healing people along the way. They have made no small commotion and have been rather political and controversial along the way. Several chapters before today's passage, Jesus stands in the synagogue and proclaims he has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to bring recovery of the sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. This is not received well by those who wish to sustain the status quo.

Needless to say, this is but one example of many in Luke's gospel where Jesus rubs people the wrong way. Perhaps that's why when he and his disciples get to a particular village one day, the residents of that village reject him and refuse to show hospitality to him and his followers. James and John, apparently irked at the inhabitants' stubbornness, implore Jesus to let them command down fire from heaven to consume them, as if they even had that power in the first place. Instead of acquiescing to their request, Jesus rebukes James and John and they go on to another village.

What we now have before us is a series of three peculiar interactions between Jesus and three unnamed characters who either express interest in following Jesus or are, themselves, asked by Jesus to follow.

First, as they were going along the road, someone comes up to Jesus and tells him that he or she will follow him wherever he goes. Jesus responds in a parable-esque manner, saying, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head." Either the person left without a word or you and I are not privy to his or her response. Either way, we are left guessing what they thought at Jesus' response or, perhaps more likely, guessing what *our* response would be if we were to be in their shoes.

Secondly, Jesus apparently picks out a fellow traveler on the road and invites him to follow him. However, this man's father has just died and he wishes to go bury him before following Jesus. It is an entirely reasonable request. However, Jesus responds by saying something I would *never* suggest anyone say to someone who has recently lost a loved one: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Likewise, you and I are left to guess as to what this man's reaction to such a blunt statement was.

Thirdly and finally, another person comes to Jesus and expresses interest in following him. However, he wishes to bid farewell to those in his home before setting off on the journey. After the first two encounters, it should not surprise us that Jesus responds as bluntly as he did the first two times. Jesus turns to the man and says, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." And so ends today's passage which is one of those passages that often leaves us with far more questions than it does answers.

Today's passage is really two stories in one, both of them distinct and yet interrelated. The first half of today's passage has to do with opposition to the Gospel and the appropriate response to such opposition. The second half of today's passage has to do with the cost of discipleship.

As to the first story, it is a truth that Jesus and his Church, for that matter, have often caused a stir. What Jesus did and preached was not always well received. It caused people to question that which they took for granted. It called for those in power to be humbled and those who were powerless to be uplifted. Jesus' message was not always popular. And, therefore, we have before us one of several examples in the gospels of Jesus and his followers being rejected.

Today's passage gives us historical evidence that when opposition is encountered, it is more often than not the typical human inclination to turn to violence. James and John, incensed by the villagers' rejection, think that retribution, violent retribution in the form of flame, is called for. However, Jesus does not indulge their violent fantasies. Instead, he simply turns around and heads for another village, leaving James and John to "walk off" their rage until they have calmed down.

As to the second story, it is also a truth that following Jesus requires making difficult decisions. Make no mistake about it, following Jesus is not a simple or easy thing. Anyone who tells you that all you need is "Jesus in your heart" and "everything will be hunky dory after that" is telling you a lie. The discipleship business that you and I are in is a costly venture. Sometimes, being a disciple requires us to take a stand and leave some things behind. Jesus, in today's passage, seems to suggest, perhaps even brutally, that being "lukewarm" is an obstacle to being a disciple.

A week ago today, I preached what was undoubtedly the most bold sermon I've ever preached in the nearly two years I've been your pastor. I preached a sermon that was by far the most political sermon

I've ever preached. It was a sermon that, frankly, scared the hell out of me to preach. It was not easy to preach. And for some of you, it was probably not easy to hear.

It was a sermon that scared me because I knew that not everyone would see things the same way. However, that is OK. After all, it is not my job, as a preacher, to make everyone happy (as if that were even possible). It is not my calling to only preach things that are easy to hear and convenient (as if that would even be preaching). It *is* my calling to preach the Word of God with humility and yet, also, boldness when it is called for.

It was and is my opinion as a preacher and pastor that this latest mass shooting calls for boldness on the church's part. *That* is why I preached that sermon. *That* is why your Session voted to approve a letter summarizing the content of that sermon to be publicized in the Shelter Island Reporter.

However, I also must share with you all that the vote at last week's session meeting was not unanimous. To those of you who disagree with part or all of the letter, I now speak directly to you:

I love you. I am your pastor. There is nothing you can do, say, believe, or not believe, that would make me love you less. And, what's more, I trust that I am but one person in a room filled with people who would agree with that statement. You are still welcome here. This is still your faith family. We, as a congregation, are more than one issue, we are more than one session meeting, we are more than one letter. We, as a congregation, are a family of faith joyfully proclaiming the gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. *That* is who we are.

To those of you who support this letter and this stance that we are taking, I implore each and every one of you to be kind and respectful to those whose opinion may differ from yours. Do not mistake their difference of opinion for a lack of faith or devotion. Do not speak harshly of them. Let us all, as the Apostle Paul calls us, "speak the truth *in love*." We have nothing to fear as a congregation as long as we let love be our guide.

I must say, as your pastor, I don't believe I've ever been more proud of this congregation! This congregation is taking a real chance and standing up for the peace we are called by Jesus to proclaim. Furthermore, we are not taking a stance in the slow, off-season when people are hibernating. Rather, we are taking a stand during the busiest time of the year! Our voices will be heard, make no mistake about it.

However, I leave you all with these words. Yes, the fact that this church has taken a public stand on a controversial topic will speak volumes. However, I cannot emphasize enough that what will speak *even more loudly*, for good or for ill, than what we believe *is how we treat those who believe differently*. Anyone can be the loudest voice in the room; it requires no wisdom, it requires no real courage. However, what *does* take wisdom and courage is to be loving and respectful and kind and generous and level-headed. We, as the church, are not called to be the loudest voice in the room. Rather, we are called to be the most loving voice in the room.

Friends, I'm excited for what lies ahead because I believe that the Spirit is working through us to be a prophetic witness on this little island of ours and beyond. We may not know what is before us, but one thing we can be sure of is that God *will* be there to greet us. Let us trust that all things work together for God's goodness!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.